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Character and the 18-year-old male

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Quad 136

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Character and the 18-year-old male



New York Times columnist David Brooks has been writing and speaking recently about issues of character. For some examples, see this [Ted Talk](#) and this article in [The Atlantic](#). A number alumni have sent me references to his [most recent offering](#) in which he reflects on the difference between résumé virtues and eulogy virtues.

Brooks writes:

It occurred to me that there were two sets of virtues, the résumé virtues and the eulogy virtues. The résumé virtues are the skills you bring to the marketplace. The eulogy virtues are the ones that are talked about at your funeral — whether you were kind, brave, honest or faithful. Were you capable of deep love?

We all know that the eulogy virtues are more important than the résumé ones. But our culture and our educational systems spend more time teaching the skills and strategies you need for career success than the qualities you need to radiate that sort of inner light. Many of us are clearer on how to build an external career than on how to build inner character.

These reflections have some relevance for educational institutions, as our alumni were suggesting. Educational institutions are far better at résumé virtues, and maybe even slightly skeptical about trying to develop eulogy virtues. But that is not true of every institution.

At the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University our Catholic and Benedictine tradition speaks directly to the issue of eulogy virtues. While we certainly care about the skills our students bring into the marketplace, we also care deeply about the kinds of people we send into the world, and our Benedictine tradition is instrumental in forming our graduates.

But, of course, there are good reasons that educational institutions and individuals often focus on résumé virtues rather than eulogy virtues. The latter are harder to talk about, subject to disagreement about the exact nature of these virtues and not easily taught or learned.

I was thinking about this recently when speaking to a young man, a high school senior, who was visiting our campus.

I spoke to him in general terms about the college selection process. I then spent a little more time talking about the specific benefits of an education at Saint John's and Saint Ben's. There are many things that make our residential, liberal arts experience great and the community at Saint John's and Saint Ben's special, but I consciously did not focus on the thing that I believe makes our educational experience unique: the way in which it changes our students by developing character.

The average 17-18 year-old wants to know what professional opportunities a college education will provide once he graduates. She wants to know if she will meet students like herself and form deep friendships. He is interested in extracurricular opportunities and the romantic ones as well. But talk of virtue, morals and character will leave the typical high school senior at best perplexed, and maybe even a little cold.

To tell the prospective college student that while their résumé might look similar if they went to Arizona State, they will graduate from Saint Ben's or Saint John's a fundamentally different person because of what they will experience in our community is too abstract and might even come across as arrogant.

So we often hide our light under a bushel and leave our strongest attribute unspoken because our "customers" aren't quite ready to hear and understand. It is just not where most 18-year-olds are as they contemplate their next four years.

We must be satisfied in knowing that over the course of four years, the 18-year-old turns into a 22-year-old who goes into the world with both a transformed résumé and character – and that we are proud to call that individual a Johnnie or a Bennie.

Image: [Flazingo](#) via Flickr

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Michael Hemesath is the 13th president of Saint John's University. A 1981 SJU graduate, Hemesath is the first layperson appointed to a full presidential term at SJU. You can find him on Twitter [at] [PrezHemesath](#).